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## Violence in Service of Religion in the Pre-classical Sanskrit Texts

ABSTRACT: The instances of perpetrated violence represented here in this essay show a sophisticated society taking care of some exceptional (such as saving a widow) or shall we say extraordinary cases (sacrificial practices), that are not a day-to-day practice. Such occurrences demonstrate a responsibility to the society to deal with cases of extraordinary distress of a situation, but they lack sensitivity or compassion.

The sacrificial practices show changes, such as using earlier on, a cow, but as time seemed to go by, it occurred that a horse was used instead. The example used here is of a horse. A prepubertal and just “graduated” Vedic scholar “won” the privilege (in getting *kali* as his “reward” of the last *vibhūta*ka nut/“coin”) in becoming the butcher for the sacrificial animal at an important sacrifice, in this case a horse.

In the second instance of violence, as for the widowed woman, young or old, an option is offered to her that certainly is contrary to the societal customs especially for women, though in support of survival. Be it the venue of becoming a common harlot. As for “expeditions”<sup>1</sup> of the Vrātyas, and such.

KEYWORDS: *agnyādheya*, Dīrghatamas Māmateya, “dog,” Draupadī, *irīṇa*, *keśī maitreya* (possibly Dālbhya), *sabhā*, *vibhūta*ka nuts

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<sup>1</sup> This term is used for raiding events to supply winter provisions for survival of families and their stock. As there was no custom of storage for cold winter among these people, in contrast to those who are settled and provide for winter situations.

Change in religious and cultural customs can already be observed in early sources extending over a long period. They are known to differing extents but most or even all cultures have adapted and adopted new ways, sometimes erasing almost all traces of certain customs, and then replacing them with new accommodations to the changing environment and other conditions. Yet, certain parts of these forgotten customs may still appear here and there, mostly unchanged. The occurrence of fragments that sometimes appear rather mysterious is often a sign that they were removed from their context, or rather their context was removed.<sup>2</sup>

With the careful scrutiny of many scholars, including Harry Falk (1986),<sup>3</sup> some of the less intelligible fragments have led to a much more comprehensive interpretation of certain other fragments, including those using the word “dog.”<sup>4</sup> It was a sobriquet or nickname for people who were dismissed after they had fulfilled the obligation of their traditional Vedic education. In their post-graduate introduction to life outside of their teacher’s house or their family home, they may have had to engage in such tasks as becoming a butcher of a sacrificial animal. Many of these post-graduates were also moving around, even in groups, to seek employment as reciters at religious ceremonies in local communities.

A young pre-pubertal lad just graduating from his Vedic studies may have been chosen to participate in rituals including the sacrificial killing of animals, including the most valuable, such as horses and

<sup>2</sup> On the topic see Harzer 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Falk 1986 compiled and elaborated on many instances of changes in sacrificial and other procedures as well as customs, such as he noted that with time, that no longer it was the case that a cow was sacrificed at the *agnyādheya*, rather as we will see in an example below, it will be a horse.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.12.1–5, where dogs are singing for their food. A white dog and a group of dogs approached the speaker, from context it was most likely Dālbhya, to get some food; he promised to bring some the next day and the next morning the dogs sang for the food. These “dogs” might be likely former agents in the sacrificial feasts, surviving in their “exile.” As for a survey of the dog-imagery used in the Indian tradition and compared with other cultures, see also White 1991.

cows. The graduates would be subjected to playing a “dice” game, with *vibhītaka* nuts.<sup>5</sup> The number of the nuts (sometimes 150, other times a different amount) were already placed in a hollow for each participant to pick up a handful. When the nuts picked up were of an even number, that was considered a fortunate position to be in. In contrast, if the last participant ended up with just one nut, called *kali*, that would be a frightening moment for this young person, as he would be the designated butcher at the given ceremony. Further, after performing his task, he would be dismissed in one of two quite different possible ways: one, killed, or two, maybe exiled, if he were lucky enough. That said, since there seems to be only one butcher at a given event, the rest of the cohort may become performers at various religious events as just mentioned above. At times we learn also about travelling performers for wedding, birth, name-giving, and as well as death ceremonies.

The task for the butcher involved killing and dismembering the sacrificial animal, either a cow or a horse. Harry Falk chose two passages from Wilhelm Caland’s *Vādhūla Sūtra* (3.94 or 3.96).<sup>6</sup> In 3.94, there is a young teenager of a respected Sūta, who must be pre-pubertal. He is decorated as a dissector of a horse, crying as someone who is going to die. Dīrghatamas Māmateya<sup>7</sup> heard him and asked: “Who is it who is crying like somebody who will die, whose head will fall off. I will teach you, so your head will not fall off.” “Yes, please sir!” He responded, “I will teach how to do this task. Your head will not fall off.” Then others come by to see what is going on, asking “Why do

<sup>5</sup> See Harzer 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Vādhūla Śrautasūtra* belongs to *Black Yajurveda* and *Vādhūla Gr̥hyasūtra* to *White Yajurveda*. Caland (1923, 1924, 1926, 1928) does not distinguish between *Vādhūla Śrautasūtra* or *Vādhūla Gr̥hyasūtra* in the titles of his articles and refers to them as *Vādhūlasūtra*. It is Helmuth von Glasenapp (1929), who produces tables of the various *sūtras* in his book.

<sup>7</sup> Dīrghatamas is literally “he who has a long darkness,” meaning that he is blind. A ṛṣi called with this name appears in texts from *Ṛgveda* to *Mahābhārata*, which is a long time between these two documents of religious, social, poetic, cultural and political background offering insights extremely important for understanding the early development of history in South Asia.

you torment the horse?” Saying this, the person inquiring will take over and his head will fall off.<sup>8</sup>

It is not that we only observe one kind of violence (i.e., the killing of animals for sacrifice). We could ask: is not it a violence that the pre-pubescent young teenager was submitted to becoming a butcher without a consideration of destroying a young life, already well prepared to support himself and his future family in the service to the society, either as a teacher of the traditional education or performing religious services in the society?

There are other instances which can be labelled “violent acts.” A different example of violence was perpetrated against women in an awkward position, namely, when they suddenly became widowed, found themselves unsupported, and had no means to survive.

<sup>8</sup> Falk 1986: 160–161. On these two pages Harry Falk gives quotes from Wilhelm Caland’s and discusses them, as well as suggests changes of the translation and interpretation of several parts of the *Vādhūla Sūtra* (3.94). The paraphrased text above is only a fraction of it, though the full footnote of the Sanskrit text follows here:

*athāto viśasanasyaivānayanaty etaṃ sūtaśreṣṭhasya putraṃ kumāram asiktaretasam aśvasya viśasitāram alaṃkṛtya rudanto yathā mariṣyantam evaṃ yo ha smeti āhur etasya purā prathama āchhyati mūrdhā ha smāsyā vipat[iṣy] atīti. tad dhaitad keṣī maitreyo yatrāśvamedheneje tad dhaikayāvnaḥ kāndamasya pitāmahaṃ vā prapitāmahaṃ vodāninyuḥ kumāram asiktaretasam aśvasya viśasitāram alaṃkṛtya rudanto yathā mariṣyantam evaṃ, tad u ha dīrghatamo māmateya upaśuśrāva; sa hovāca kiṃ etad rudanti ka eṣa ghoṣa iti; taṃ hocur bhagavān asīttham itthaṃ sūtaśreṣṭhasya putram udānayananti kumāram asiktaretasam aśvasya viśasitāram alaṃkṛtya rudanto yathā mariṣyantam evaṃ; tasya mūrdhā vipatiṣyati tad etad rudanti, sa eṣa ghoṣa iti sa hovāca kumārehi te (Falk emends: so’) haṃ tad vakṣyāmi yathā tvam evāśvaṃ viśasiṣyasi no te mūrdha vipatiṣyati. tathā bhagava iti. (sa) etad ṣaḍraṃ sūktam provācottarato ‘śvasyopaviṣyāsiḥalakenāsiḥpathān āpiṣann assai kas tvā chyati kas tvā viśāstīti. tam u tvānya upanikramya kumāra kim idam aśvaṃ kliṣnann āssa itthaṃ vā aśvaṃ viśasiṣyatīty (Falk emends: viśasiṣyasīty) asim ādāyācchāsyasīti (Falk emends: ācchāsyati) tasya ha mūrdhā vipatiṣyati. sa haivaṃ cakāra. tam u hānya upanikramyovāca kumāra kim idam aśvaṃ kliṣnann āssa itthaṃ vā aśvaṃ viśasiṣyatīti asim ādāyācachau. tasya ha mūrdhā vipapāta. tan nu haitad evam eva kuryāt.*

There was a stump in the gathering hall (*sabhā*), which was used in a variety of ways, from ancient times. It was used in social, civic, and religious events. This paper examines some of the ancient activities in this *sabhā*, apart from being used for gatherings on various occasions, such as playing games, or drinking, sexual activities, and still others, such as taking care of a sick child.

The *sabhā* was also a place for cremating the dead (Falk 1986: 86), as it was established at a confluence of water streams.<sup>9</sup> As very traditional Brahmans even today apply geomancy, it seems it was a useful tool in early times as well. Alternately, there are other texts that do not support or even forbid the performance of cremations and burials at water sources; rather, they recommend the use of a fertile soil.<sup>10</sup>

In the *sabhā*, the place for games was a hollow, which was established at the water source. This place was called *īriṇa* and was used in resolving certain situations, such as that of a young woman without brothers, who still could obtain some support to survive.<sup>11</sup> In the case of a young widow who did not have any sons, she was able to secure some resources for the last rites of her husband. She sat down on the stump and was pummeled with a die. Thus, she obtained an inheritance.

Uṣas (Dawn) was described as revealing her beautiful body, as if she wanted to attract men.<sup>12</sup> Just as a woman from the South would sit down on the grave, here Uṣas sat down on the stump, symbolizing here

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Āśvalāyana Gr̥hyasūtram* 4.1.14.

<sup>10</sup> Pischel in the context of *īriṇa* (*R̥gveda* 8.4.3, 8.87.1 and 8.87.4) posits that the phrase *apā kṛtam* added to *īriṇa* can be considered as a place, which at times is waterless. Other scholars, such as Ludwig (*R̥gveda* 7.4.61) understood as such, though interestingly without consideration that lightening is not always accompanied by rain.

Other sources, examined by Pischel, such as Sāyaṇa: describes *īriṇa* as turfless, holding salt and as dryland. The last mentioning is supported by *Śaunaka Atharvaveda* 4.15.12.

<sup>11</sup> See Pischel 1897: 222–225.

According to Monier-Williams Dictionary, in the *R̥gveda*, *īriṇa* denotes a “water source” or “spring” and in *Atharvaveda*, “a hole.”

<sup>12</sup> Falk 1986: 87. Here Falk disregards the erotic description of Uṣas.

a grave with the ashes of those cremated. As a woman without brothers turning to men for the ritual for progeny and for a symbolic clump of soil for the burial. A comparison is made with a woman from the South who had sat down on the grave to procure some property. A woman who did not have any male family members who could perform the last rites for her, because if she could not obtain any means to survive, it seems like she could be killed or become a prostitute (*pum̐ścalī*).<sup>13</sup>

As already mentioned, the stump/post, indicates a grave in the *sabhā*. It had to be covered in its lower part, because that part was in touch with some of those dead (presumably the ashes of the dead) underneath the stump.

Some correlatives can be found in the *Mahābhārata*, yet also in modern times, such as in particular the work of Madeleine Biarreau. In her book “Histoires de poteaux...” (“Stories about Posts...”), she studied a great variety of uses, but many of the instances involving posts seem parallel, with one main difference that they were or are in the open air and in public.<sup>14</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* epic depicted events of the time when the two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas were contesting, which was leading to the war between them. Here, both sides of cousins would not only be about the gaming to resolve a dispute, a sudden focus on adding humiliation on the Pāṇḍavas was by dragging in their common wife, figuratively as well as literally. Draupadī was known to have had five husbands. Hence, the question or concern about being supported did not apply, and yet she became a subject to very shameful behavior: being dragged to the assembly (*sabhā*), where women customarily did not have access, especially not being properly escorted, plus not dressed. She was dragged in by an attendant on the command of the Kauravas, the cousins of the Pāṇḍavas, who tried to use her as a kind of peon, humiliating not only her, but all the Pāṇḍavas.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Pum̐ścalī* was a female accompaniment to the *Vrātyas* on their expeditions.

<sup>14</sup> Biarreau 1989, translation 2004.

<sup>15</sup> On this episode see also Hildebeitel 1980; 1981; Vassilkov 1989–1990. *Mahābhārata* 2.27.59.1–2.27.60. All references to *Mahābhārata* are based on Sukthankar et al’s edition (*Mahābhārata* 1933–1966) unless otherwise stated.

The *sabhā* was a public venue, and dragging Draupadī during her monthly period and half-dressed, and then being publicly disrobed, would constitute public shaming. This humiliation is to be understood as Draupadī's religious degradation, as the *sabhā* served numerous activities, including sexual, as already mentioned above. Indeed, hers is not such a direct example of violence in service of religion, but she has become an object of violence, tainting or smearing her in such a way that she may not fully recover from such acts that deprive her from relying on religious protection. Even though there are instances later on, in which she does get divine protection.

Although not a similar instance to Draupadī's, but symbolic action of the use of the slab of stone, being observed in the narrative of Damayantī, trying to save her husband Nala.<sup>16</sup> While she was roaming in her search for him, she rested on a slab of stone / stump.<sup>17</sup> The stump can appear to be a symbol of relief from pain, possibly that not much might happen, while a woman sat on a stump with a certain symbolism, mentioned above as providing some relief. Damayantī experienced extreme hardships in the forest being clothed only in a piece of torn off fabric, of which the other part was taken by her departing husband.

In this sampling of different scenarios of violence over a fairly long period of time since several centuries BCE into the early centuries CE of pre-classical period in North and Northwest of the peninsula, we can observe that so many instances of violence were not considered as violence *per se*, as in such cases of the freshly graduated teenager mentioned at the beginning of the essay, as it was a matter of tradition.

<sup>16</sup> Narrative occurring in the *Mahābhārata* 3. The Forest Book. 61.1. van Buitenen translates "stone slab." Damayantī rested on it. It resonates with the depiction of the behavior of women from the South, when in times of loss of their husbands.

<sup>17</sup> The comparison of the situation of the two women here is not identical, but it is possible to see correspondence in purpose, if not semblance of the material of the piece of support in question. It is possible to see the difference in the material given to the different circumstances, one being an early Vedic practice in a possibly lowland at a river and the other post-Vedic in the Vindhya hills.

As for the fate of women who may not have had any means to live on, after their husband passed away, the choices were not compassionate. As culture commanded for women to be completely dependent on the male members of the family, there were hardly any solutions. And in the matter of survival of a widow without brothers, who would support a woman who lost her husband, there were some hard choices conducted in the *sabhā*.

As mentioned above that both samples discussed, were not considered acts of violence at the time they occurred. And yet, subsequently we find erasures and attitudes changing towards these practices as they are replaced by new offerings with the substitution of certain aspects. One concrete example could be seen in replacing meat with a vegetarian morsel of rice, at important religious ceremonies.

The sources used for this study did not always open up sufficiently to observe the full content of the narrative. It may not be a surprise to learn that some parts may have been removed and as such it becomes difficult to assess what is happening. Hence narratives offer a certain amount transparency to weave together a more comprehensive story. From the *Rgveda* to the *Mahābhārata* and beyond, there are still many narratives to be excavated to be sure what the whole performance entails. We already think we know, but that is not fully disclosed.

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